

FROM CARICATURE TO CHARACTER:  
THE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED  
IN DICKENS'S NOVELS  
(PART THREE)

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**Mr. Dick: Man in the Middle**

Whether or not one accepts Stanley Tick's suggestion that the abused Mr. Dick is a type of Dickens himself, with Mr. Dick's failed autobiographical attempts signaling Dickens's own literary struggles and his repression of distressing childhood memories, Tick's argument does begin a necessary process of reclamation. Though less central to the novel than Tick suggests, *David Copperfield's* resident simpleton does deserve rescue from those who would dismiss him as "merely absurd," a comic device and little else (Tick 145). Mr. Dick stands midway between Dickens's earlier and later intellectually disabled figures in a number of ways. In addition to inhabiting Dickens's favorite novel, published roughly halfway through his writing career, Mr. Dick links the author's earlier, more stereotypical portrayals of cognitive disability with those later, more stable and empowering configurations located in Maggy and Sloppy. Mr. Dick also figures as a transitional figure within his own novel, his role as clown slowly reconstituted into that of a consequential, productive, and equal member of his community.

This second generation of simple characters may not seem so pitiable as Smike, or serve plot action in such facile ways as did Barnaby, but they do occasionally provide reliable doses of laughter: Dickens never completely abandons caricature's reliable effects. Of the five characters under consideration, Mr. Dick most closely approximates the archetypal court fool, his words made the more hilarious by Miss Trotwood's oscillations between total confidence in the man's supposed wisdom and the apparent need to correct his behavior. Copperfield first meets Betsey's grey-haired charge after Mr. Dick has nearly scared the boy into running back off the property onto which he has just ventured. After gazing at the travel-worn child from an upstairs window with a squinting eye and odd mix of shaking and nodding head movements, the laughing Mr. Dick comes downstairs to meet Betsey's befuddled nephew, only to be chastised for his impropriety and reminded of his intellectual powers:

'Mr. Dick,' said my aunt, 'don't be a fool, because nobody can be more discreet than you can, when you choose. We all know that. So don't be a fool, whatever you are...you have heard me mention David Copperfield? Now don't pretend not to have a memory, Because you and I know better.' (188; ch. 13)

The hilarious mix of praise and reprobation here reflects Miss Trotwood's standing confusion concerning the nature of Mr. Dick's condition. During one unguarded moment, she may begin admitting her ignorance about his real state to herself, and then the next boast loudly in his defense that "nobody knows what that man's mind is except myself" (200-1; ch. 14). Her secret perplexity makes assertions like the one above the more striking, by contrast. In this moment of Mr. Dick's introduction, she claims for him both awareness and intelligence, a clear understanding of social mores and strong powers of recollection. That he has neither the reader and Copperfield both suspect, making each succeeding affirmation of Mr. Dick's "sound advice" and "common sense" increasingly entertaining (189; ch. 13, 207; ch. 14).

Patently comic, Mr. Dick's words also serve additional, practical functions within the intimate social space he inhabits. Mr. Dick's simple recommendations inadvertently provide Copperfield with a moral yardstick against which he measures himself (607-8; ch. 42), and supply Miss Trotwood with refreshingly direct propositions that spur her to action. When she asks Mr. Dick what she should do with the ten-year-old who has wandered onto her property, he offers, "wash him!" (189; ch. 13). Later, confronted with the vicious Mr. Murdstone's demand that she hand over his errant stepson, Miss Trotwood again asks Mr. Dick what she should do with Copperfield and he responds with another gem: "Have him measured for a suit of clothes directly" (207; ch. 14). In both situations, Mr. Dick skips the sociological intricacies of extended family—which he presumably does not understand anyhow—and suggests a course of action that presupposes acceptance, responsibility, and the need for immediate community formation.

In this and other ways, Mr. Dick proves himself quite the relationship builder. His joint guardianship of and developing friendship with David Copperfield help Miss Trotwood warm to the boy—whom she still, comically wishes were a girl—and his repeat visits to Copperfield's school bring the students there together in appreciation of his entertaining, ingenious shaping of objects from assorted odds and ends (245; ch. 17). He also becomes invaluable to the headmaster Doctor Strong, a man whose professional interest in Mr. Dick quickly becomes personal; the two friends spend long hours walking together while the Doctor reads Johnson's *Dictionary* to

his eager listener. When the machinations of Uriah Heep plunge the Doctor into a deep depression that estranges him from his wife, Mr. Dick's familiarity with the couple puts him in the perfect position to reunite them. Constitutionally unable to ferret out the source of his friends' difficulty, he is still able to recognize their feelings and compassionate them. Accordingly, he devotes himself to walking independently with Strong and with his wife Annie, becoming "what no one else could be—a link between them" (607; ch. 42). Mr. Dick also knits his community together by contributing to its financial stability; he promptly takes a job to support Miss Trotwood when Heep's secret maneuvering reduces her to poverty. This job, which begins as an "innocent deception" by Copperfield to occupy Mr. Dick's time and convince him of his usefulness, turns into a "way of being really useful" when Mr. Dick takes to copying out legal documents for Traddles (512–13; ch. 36). The task does present a significant challenge for the imbecile. Each time his mind wanders onto Charles I (the subject of a persistent monomania which compels him to write long sentences connecting the monarch's severed head with his own jumbled thoughts), his hands follow suit—with regretful consequences for his copy. Mr. Dick works hard at the task, however, and disciplines himself to switch over to the incomplete pages of his journal-like "memorial" whenever unwanted impulses strike him. Over time, he trains himself to put off writing in the memorial until the workday has past, allowing him to earn a reliable, helpful sum of money each week.

Mr. Dick's relational and monetary contributions to his present community are the more noteworthy because his previous communal experiences failed him so thoroughly. Dickens's tone flips from the hilarious to the sober as Copperfield's aunt explains to the boy why Mr. Dick abandoned his surname, "Babley," years ago. Apparently, Mr. Dick had been "ill-used enough, by some that bear it, to have a mortal antipathy for it" (197; ch. 14). His brother, called to watch over his disabled sibling by their dead father's will, had disregarded his duty, refusing to expend the substantial energy and time required on a daily basis when caring for someone of Mr. Dick's ilk:

'A proud fool!' said my aunt. 'Because his brother was a little eccentric...he didn't like to have him visible about his house, and sent him away to some private asylum-place, though he had been left to his particular care by their deceased father, who thought him almost a natural. And a wise man he must have been to think so! Mad himself, no doubt.' Again, as my aunt looked quite convinced, I endeavoured to look quite convinced also... 'nobody knows what that man's mind is, except myself' (199; ch. 14).

Miss Trotwood dismisses point blank the notion that Mr. Dick is either mentally disabled or mentally ill—a ridiculous stance that imperils the authority of her perspective—but her decision to remove Mr. Dick from one of the period's many home-based asylums ten years earlier and place him under her own care does situate her firmly within a small but progressive camp shared by Mr. Dick's more perceptive father and a kind sister who cared for her disabled brother until her own marriage. Miss Trotwood and Mr. Dick's more understanding, now absent family members represent an enlightened minority who not only believe that the intellectually disabled deserve a more personal approach to care, but who are willing to offer regular ministrations themselves instead of relegating such duties to servants or an institution. David Copperfield's surprise that someone with such a compromised mind is living with his middle-class aunt instead of in a professional facility suggests the relative novelty of Miss Trotwood's course of action (190; ch. 13). Like those unconventional practitioners whose course of *moral treatment* replaced physical restraint and isolation with gradual, patient behavior modification, Miss Trotwood has paired good-humored correction with relationship-building, allowing herself to become intimately involved in Mr. Dick's daily life. Admittedly, she has gone a bit overboard, denying a disability which Mr. Dick himself claims as his own when she is out of earshot (635), but her peculiar brand of willful blindness allows this opinionated woman to minister to someone she might otherwise ignore. She encourages his ambition to complete his "memorial," and, though circumstances suggest Mr. Dick will never finish the task, she confidently assumes it will be published some day (200; ch. 14). She also applauds Mr. Dick's hobby of turning failed project pages into kites he can fly and thereby—so he believes—disseminate his half-baked ideas at least the locals (211; ch. 15).

Mr. Dick is an active, valued member of his community, despite his disabilities. While Copperfield may pity his kite-flying friend, he also considers Mr. Dick an equal (211; ch. 15). Where the friendship between Nicholas and Smike devolved into a condescending association connecting protector with protected, the ties binding this novel's hero and sidekick draw them and other characters onto a level playing field. Mr. Dick earns far more respect from his peers (and his reader) than his predecessors, while occupying considerably less narrative space than they. In fact, as Dickens's intellectually disadvantaged characters begin to serve less central roles in their respective plots, their portraits become more stable and they demonstrate greater personal agency and freedom of action. It is as if the virus of stereotype that pervasively infected Smike (and Barnaby too, if only for a time) finds itself expunged almost immediately upon invading Mr. Dick's system.

### Maggy and Sloppy: The Socially Viable, Assimilable Imbecile

Instead of employing another dramatic death or cerebral overhaul to resolve Mr. Dick's storyline, Dickens allows him to develop close interpersonal connections while retaining not only his life but his disability. Mr. Dick learns to control—though not eliminate—his wayward thoughts, and in so doing reflects Dickens's growing optimism about the educability and potential productivity of those with irreversible intellectual disabilities. Dickens had long commiserated with poorly treated idiots and imbeciles, commending as early as 1841 the humanitarian efforts of two English prisons that had seen moral management techniques improve the self-reliance of inmates with "rickety intellects" (*Letters* 2: 273). These sympathies deepened further after Dickens published *David Copperfield*. In 1853, Dickens made a long-delayed trip to the Essex Hall Asylum for Idiots near Colchester, an offshoot of the groundbreaking idiot asylum begun five years previously at Park House, Highgate. This visit rewarded Dickens's optimism with numerous examples of disabled children who, having first been trained in proper hygiene, learned to write a bit or even complete simple mathematical problems. Dickens was fascinated by the implications of such training, by the prospect that many of these patients might soon contribute to society in meaningful, material ways. Following this visit, the June 4, 1853, issue of his weekly journal *Household Words* opened with an article entitled "Idiots," co-written by the novelist himself and W. H. Wills. In this essay, Dickens takes to task those who dismiss the idiot as "a hopeless, irreclaimable, unimprovable being," noting that:

closer study of the subject has now demonstrated that the cultivation of such senses and instincts as the idiot is seen to possess, will, besides frequently developing others that are latent within him but obscured, so brighten those glimmering lights, as immensely to improve his condition, both with reference to himself and to society. (*Household Words* 313).

Dickens's hope involves not just the rudimentary rehabilitation, but the training and employment, of idiots—to the betterment of society as a whole. Predictably, he makes a particularly loud call for the publicly funded training and management of *pauper* idiots, a cross-section ignored by the current incarnation of the Poor Law (*Household Words* 316). After providing a useful but dry history of those recently established European and English institutions that have serviced idiots drawn from working and middle-class families, Dickens takes the reins from his co-author and directs his characteristic wit against those individuals he thinks least inclined to concern them-



selves with this population. English ladies, whose sensibilities presumably curtail any extended consideration of such "disagreeable matters," receive the brunt of Dickens's satire in an unabashed effort to awaken *everyone's* sympathies to the widespread neglect and marginalization of a sizeable, politically neglected population (*Household Words* 316). The upshot of Dickens's quickening concern is that subsequent idiots in his fiction bear stable intellectual disabilities that nevertheless fail to disqualify them from full participation in those supportive communities benefiting from their presence.

Like those who have gone before, *Little Dorrit's* Maggy receives the requisite sprinkling of pity and good-natured laughter from her narrator. Large hands and feet, a curiously fixed smile, and an unseeing expression rendered by "Phiz" as large orbs with colorless irises join the more comic elements of her tattered costume and enormous hat in establishing an immediately recognizable character-type (142; bk. 1, ch. 9). Having served their purpose, however, these elements of Little Dorrit's friend slip into the background. The "great white cap, with a quantity of opaque frilling" continues to flap comically about whenever Maggy appears, but far more salient characteristics command our attention as soon as the narrator moves from describing her appearance to establishing her character. Maggy's first appearance, in which she excitedly runs into Amy Dorrit and drops a basket of potatoes, informs more than it entertains. As Arthur Clennam and Amy help Maggy gather her stock, the heroine praises her friend's self-reliance. Maggy, she explains, ekes out a living by selling potatoes and—as is often the case with Dickens's intellectually challenged characters—by running errands. The twenty-eight-year-old imbecile has also begun to read "with a large balance of success against her failures," enough to make appropriate purchases at a grocer's. Though Maggy benefits from the occasional assistance and compassion of Amy, Maggy's living alone in independent lodgings underscores the extent of her self-governance. In addition, and unlike Mr. Dick who owed his improved circumstances to another person's removing him bodily from an abusive environment, Maggy has taken the initiative to improve her situation. She gradually became so "attentive and very industrious" that her grandmother began allowing her to move in and out of the house without escort. Eventually, Maggy's efforts paid off, and she gained "enough to do to support herself" (142–44; ch. 9).

Maggy's origins provide a stark contrast to her present, relatively independent, status. After a high fever compromised her mind's development at the age of ten, she returned from a comfortable hospital to a hazardous environment that only grew more so as her grandmother struggled to deal with her transformed relative.

The caregiver's habitual drinking continued, as did the violent application of "[b]room-handles and pokers" to the young girl's body. Maggy's grandmother, who once served as Amy's own nurse, simply failed to provide necessary care for this more difficult dependent. Maggy's physical weakness, her extremely poor vision, a predisposition towards spontaneous laughter, and a disability which prevented the twenty-eight-year-old's mind from expanding beyond the cognitive capacity of a ten-year-old, presented a most difficult challenge to an otherwise capable guardian who just "did not know what to do with her, and [who] for some years was very unkind to her indeed" (143-44; ch. 9).

From Amy's perspective, however, Maggy's disabilities do not present a justifiable impediment to relationship: Maggy often functions as a permanent member of the Dorrit family during their residence in the Marshalsea Prison. She accompanies Amy on various errands about London, and when mealtime brings Amy back to the Marshalsea, Maggy frequently appears in the background, helping to set the table, prepare food, and clean up afterwards. Maggy runs errands, delivers messages, and helps out when a family member becomes ill. In less busy moments, she may appear in a corner quietly doing work with her hands, or eagerly waiting for Amy to tell her a story. And when chance suddenly makes Amy's father wealthy, he sets out to improve Maggy's wardrobe as well as that of his blood kin (470; bk. 1, ch. 35). Separated from Maggy during a subsequent continental tour with the family, Amy writes of how much she misses that friend who looked on Amy as her "little mother," asking Arthur to let Maggy know "she never can have regretted our separation more than I" (521-22; bk. 2, ch.4). Maggy has earned such allegiance. The reciprocated affection between these two women signals a more egalitarian social and economic relationship than that existing between either Smike and Nicholas or Barnaby and his mother. Unlike victimized, rescued Smike, who ever remained the *receiver* of goods and services—and quite dissimilar from the naïve and malleable Barnaby—Maggy has removed herself from one environment and successfully inserted herself into a new social network that recognizes her membership as a valuable partner. Dickens's fully rendered and consistent portrayal of Maggy's character and abilities precludes her reduction to a cipher, to some kind of moveable type positioned wherever an imminent crisis requires the catalyst of her ignorance—or where a somber moment awaits the comic relief of her odd appearance. Unlike Barnaby, she does not find that her intellectual faculties, self-awareness, or language shift to meet the changing demands of the plot. She speaks in the same manner in the last pages—complete with repetition, poor pronunciation, and

simple diction—that she did when first introduced. Arguably, both the consistency of her characterization and the substance of her character owe something to her relatively peripheral position within the plot. Even more than Mr. Dick, that is, Maggy often appears in frame without hijacking our attention by way of the traditional high jinks or sad spectacle, instead moving visibly but unostentatiously across the background.

In the same way, Sloppy of *Our Mutual Friend* attains a degree of self-dependence, his intellectual difference and comical quirks flavoring instead of overwhelming and controlling Dickens's characterization of his final imbecile. All the appropriate surface minutiae unambiguously designate Sloppy's intellectual deficiency when he first appears. His long body, little head, angular frame, tendency to stare with open mouth, and the ease with which he breaks into loud laughter or violent tears, verify that he is indeed the "natural" Betty Higden took him for when she first began caring for the boy, now a man. And just as Maggy had her amusing head-gear and Barnaby his tattered dress, Sloppy too has the idiot's humorous costume, in his case a profusion of buttons sewn across his clothes which glare "at the public to a quite preternatural extent." (200; bk. 1, ch. 16) The very emblem of Sloppy's comedic role, however, also signals an area of competency and the future means to a measure of self-determination. The nimble hands which sewed this profusion of glass and wooden eyes across his chest also make Sloppy an able mangler, providing a steady source of income to help Betty make ends meet, and later win him the independent income of a cabinet-maker.<sup>1</sup> Dickens also turns Sloppy's modest literacy to both comic and practical effect. The young man's facility at reading the newspaper allows him to entertain the children by dramatizing the different police voices described therein, and whenever a letter arrives in the mail, he reads out its contents for his elderly guardian who can no longer decipher handwriting herself. "You mightn't think it," Betty explains to the Boffins, "but Sloppy is a beautiful reader" (198; bk. 1, ch. 16).

Betty Higden's words here recognize only to refute traditional expectations of the imbecile's mental and relational incompetence, and contribute to Dickens's portrait of Sloppy as a fully participatory member of his community. Sloppy functions as an integral part of his household, whether living with Mrs. Higden or Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, the retired couple who assume care of Sloppy when Betty leaves town. In both situations, though still under the watchful eye of a guardian, Sloppy is entrusted with considerable freedom of movement. He comes and goes as he pleases, accomplishing his professional duties as easily as he completes the more clandestine



tasks assigned him by his friends. In addition to the woodworking profession he adopts after he relocates to the Boffins', Sloppy serves his new hosts by shadowing the mischievous Silas Wegg across the latter half of the tale, summarily depositing the villain in a scavenger cart when his subterfuge has been finally uncovered.

The novel's penultimate chapter marks Sloppy's apotheosis and, arguably, the culmination of Dickens's achievement in realizing a more nearly balanced intellectually disabled character. Abandoned at birth by unmarried parents and raised for a time in an unforgiving workhouse environment, Sloppy is yet able to move past the failed relationships of his youth and begin to shape his own. In these final pages, he calls for the first time upon the crippled but self-confident Jenny Wren and sets to wooing, if unwittingly, the woman Dickens implies will become his future wife. Jenny makes it easy for him, beginning their tête-à-tête with a reference to the much talked-about incident in which he dexterously tossed Silas Wegg into a mud-cart. Sloppy returns the compliment, gawking at the beautiful hair she provocatively lets down, and praising the skill with which she has pieced together the doll clothes she makes for a living. Only after offering to carve an ornamental handle for a nearby crutch, an instrument he assumes belongs to her father, does Sloppy discover that the attractive woman before him is lame. When the determined but half abashed young woman demonstrates her stilted gait, Sloppy dismisses her apology that her walk appears "not pretty," and pleases her with an encouraging, candid observation of her dexterity: "It seems to me that you hardly want it at all" (788; bk. 4, ch. 16). Similarly, Jenny's amusing suggestion that Sloppy is too "slow" to understand her references to the as yet unnamed, unseen "Him"—an imaginary suitor she has long claimed will one day step through the door and marry her—undercuts by indirectly ridiculing the idea that Sloppy is incapable of understanding and responding to her inviting banter. (And, of course, this concatenation of dialogue and circumstance strongly implies that Sloppy himself will become the long hoped for "Him.") In this way, happenstance allows the two to mitigate the stigmatizing force of one another's disability, encouraging them to engage one another first as personalities, and only secondly as impaired bodies.

As one moves chronologically through Dickens's oeuvre, his intellectually disabled characters demonstrate an increasing quantity of self-reliance and social competence. This is not, it should be noted, the result of methodical progress up some intellectual scale which assigns "idiots" a spot in the nether regions and locates the "feeble-minded" simpleton as just under normal. Dickens's is not some linear path from journeyman inventor of the "idiot" to master

maker of the "imbecile," though it may at times seem so. Smike and (the as-yet-untransformed) Barnaby attain less stable and advantageous positions in their own communities not because they are severely disabled and their more successful successors higher-functioning, but because their respective plots require them to serve different functions—roles which allow for dramatically varying degrees of personal agency and social success. Smike and Maggy, similar in their respective histories of abuse, severely limited literacy, compromised understanding, and strong desire for companionship, are awarded differing degrees of relational success with the families that accommodate them. The testing of Nicholas Nickleby's character requires a disposable dependent he can temporarily shepherd, a lamb that can be sacrificed at the sentimental feast that closes the novel without disrupting the many marriages that accompany it. Little Dorrit's own happy ending, on the other hand, does not require Maggy's complete removal. In fact, it requires her presence. Though briefly separated when the suddenly rich Dorrit family departs on a European tour, the two women reunite when another, equally abrupt financial shift returns the family to poverty. Maggy remains beside Amy during the family tragedies that follow, through to a cheerful denouement that places her on the church steps along with the other secondary characters, there to await the arrival of the soon-to-be-married Miss Dorrit and Mr. Clennam.

In the same way, Barnaby and Sloppy evidence comparable competences, yet move along radically divergent paths. Both exhibit a money-making facility with their fingers, prove themselves trustworthy messengers for their caregivers, speak well even where they understand imperfectly, and demonstrate strong emotional ties to those close to them (along with an unashamed willingness to express that emotion openly). And yet where Barnaby requires a mental makeover before he can be reintegrated into his own community, Sloppy steps confidently from one home to the next with no indication that either his intellectual capacity or his social skills have in any way been altered. The portrait of cognitive disability with which Dickens ends the novel provides his readers with his most empowering vision of intellectual otherness yet, a vision the more liberating because Dickens allows his readers to construct not only the likely course of their imbecilic hero's romantic future, but his very features and mannerisms. Unlike Barnaby, whose comic costume, peculiar physical postures, and odd behavior are repeatedly inscribed across nearly a quarter of Hablot Browne's illustrations for *Barnaby Rudge*, Sloppy appears in not one of Marcus Stone's thirty-eight engraved plates for *Our Mutual Friend*.<sup>2</sup> The closest we get to a sighting occurs in chapter sixteen, where the text

accompanying the image of a doorframe explains that the concealed Sloppy is just inside, working furiously at pressing clothes. In the mature act of a true author-cum-social activist, Dickens manages to avoid altogether the visual cues that had worked to define and predetermine the extent of a disabled character's practical agency—both in fiction and in society—freeing the reader to imagine this last intellectually disabled character as fully liberated from those traditional expectations and prejudices that so often, so completely, bound his kind.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One idiot Dickens described "Idiots" recounting his visit to the Essex Hall Asylum in 1853 had "acquired a passion for sewing on buttons...If he can only find a visitor with a loose button or with a button wanting, he is happy, and instantly sets to work" (314). In the same paragraph, Dickens describes another idiot who learns carpentry, a skill similar to that of furniture making, which Sloppy later pursues.

<sup>2</sup> Barnaby appears in thirteen of Browne's fifty-nine illustrations. Smike, Maggy, and Mr. Dick are each pictured five times in their respective novels.

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